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## HAMLET AND LAMETH

Exactly fifty years ago, J. A. Bryant Jr. tentatively suggested a number of parallels between Shakespeare’s Hamlet and a figure of considerable importance in Christian tradition, the antediluvian patriarch commonly known as Lamech.<sup>1</sup> Bryant was struck by Hamlet’s words in the final scene of the play, convincing Laertes that his killing of Polonius had not been intentional:

Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil  
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,  
That I have shot my arrow o’er the house  
And hurt my brother.<sup>2</sup>

Intentionally or not, however, Polonius was killed with a sword. Why, then, does Hamlet employ this curious metaphor of the misdirected arrow? Bryant found Hamlet’s metaphor ‘strangely reminiscent of the legend of Lamech’—according to which, as will be fully elaborated below, Lamech kills his ancestor Cain by unwittingly shooting him with an arrow—but he hesitated in presuming conscious allusion:

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Bryant Jr., *Hippolyta’s View: Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare’s Plays* (Kentucky, 1961), 134–5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, V.ii.213–16; citations are from *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (1986; repr. London, 1998).

There is no clear evidence, of course, that Shakespeare thought of the legend here; but the consonance of that legend with *Hamlet* as regards the spread of sin, the blindness that precipitates the catastrophe, and the catastrophe that purges is a further indication of the general background against which Shakespeare wrote his play. Like Lamech, Hamlet sees the errors of his own blindness as spreading the corruption which will end in a bloody catastrophe.<sup>3</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, Bryant's suggestion has been universally ignored and remains all that *Hamlet* scholarship has thus far made of Hamlet and Lamech.

It will be argued here, however, that Bryant's commentary does not exhaust this subject and that the parallels between Hamlet and Lamech – including an anagrammatic link between the names Hamlet and 'Lameth', an alternative form of Lamech's name<sup>4</sup> – are both more numerous and more specific than has been previously recognized, with important implications for our understanding of the character of Hamlet and hence the play as a whole. In fact, the arrow metaphor which caught Bryant's attention is but a minor and indeed rather dubious piece of evidence. Besides apparently being unaware of the alternative form of Lamech's name, Bryant overlooked far more important analogies, principally that between Hamlet's killing of his fratricidal uncle Claudius and Lamech's killing of his fratricidal great-great-grandfather Cain. When these hitherto undetected parallels are taken into account and viewed in their proper context, the evidence for conscious allusion is as clear as one may hope for it to be.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hippolyta's View*, 134–5.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid cumbersome formulations, I will mostly use 'Lamech' when discussing the figure in general and 'Lameth' when discussing a particular text in which that form is employed.

Two patriarchs named Lamech appear in the Bible, the Cainite and the Sethite. The Cainite Lamech, who is mainly of concern here, appears only in the Old Testament (Genesis 4:18-24), while the Sethite appears both in the Old (Genesis 5:28-31, 1 Chronicles 1:3) and the New Testament (Luke 3:36). The brief account of the Cainite Lamech recounts his birth in the sixth generation from Cain, his bigamous marriage and its progeny, and ends with a cryptic passage in which lie the origins of the Lamech legend. As it happens, Shakespeare, being best acquainted with the Geneva and Bishops' translations of the Bible, could have known this crucial passage in at least two conflicting renditions.<sup>5</sup> The Geneva version reads:

Then Lamech saide vnto his wiues Adah and Zillah, Heare my voice, ye wiues of  
Lamech: hearken vnto my speech: for I would slay a man in my wound, and a yong  
man in mine hurt.

If Kain shalbe auenged seuen folde, truly Lamech seuentie times seuen folde.  
(Genesis 4:19-24)<sup>6</sup>

How this reading came about will be explained below. For the present, it is important to note that in having Lamech only say that he *would* kill the two men, rather than that he *had* in fact already killed them, the Geneva differs from virtually all other versions, including the Bishops' Bible, where verses 4:23-4 read:

And Lamech saide vnto his wiues Ada and Sella: Heare my voyce ye wyues of  
Lamech, hearken vnto my speache: for I haue slayne a man to the woundyng of my  
selfe, & a young man to myne owne punishment.

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<sup>5</sup> On Shakespeare's knowledge of the Geneva and Bishops' Bibles see Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark, 1999), 38–48.

<sup>6</sup> For this and subsequent references to the Geneva, see *The Bible: that is, the Holy Scriptvres* (London, 1590); unless otherwise noted, the Geneva is cited throughout.

If Cain shalbe auenged seuen folde, truely Lamech seuentie tymes & seuen tymes.<sup>7</sup>

Similar readings are to be found in the Tyndale, Great Bible, Douay-Rheims and King James versions, as well as in the Vulgate; in all of these, Lamech says to his wives that he has killed two men, an adult and a youth.

The passage, in this standard reading, has puzzled readers since ancient times. Who are the two men? Why has Lamech killed them? What does he mean by the seventy-sevenfold vengeance? In order to provide answers to such questions an apocryphal tradition on Lamech emerged, building on the cue provided by Lamech's final words, referring to God's decree that 'whosoever slayeth Kain, he shall be punished seuen folde' (Genesis 4:15). The adult man killed by Lamech, the interpreters concluded, was none other than his ancestor Cain. Other details of the biblical text were then construed in various ways which fit this central premise, ultimately giving rise to an elaborate account which may be summarized as follows: Lamech, in his prime the greatest of archers but now grown old and blind, refuses to stop hunting with his bow, employing a boy, sometimes identified as his son Tubalcain, to guide him and find him marks to shoot at; one day, the boy thinks he sees a beast in the bush and instructs Lamech to shoot at it; Lamech's arrow hits the mark, yet it turns out to be no beast but his outlawed ancestor Cain; realizing what has happened, Lamech beats the boy to death in a fit of rage and returns home to his wives, lamenting his fate. The appeal of the story is easy to perceive: not only does it account for the references to the two men in Genesis 4:23, but it has the added advantage of wrapping up the otherwise incomplete history of Cain.

The account first appeared in ancient biblical commentary and pseudepigrapha, whence it entered the mainstream of Christian tradition at least as early as Jerome. Jerome's Letter 36, in reply to Pope Damasus' inquiry about several biblical passages including

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<sup>7</sup> *The holie Bible* (London, 1568).

Genesis 4:15 (the sevenfold punishment pronounced on whoever kills Cain), does not contain an account of the actual shooting, but does take note of the tradition, encountered in a ‘certain Hebrew volume’, that Cain was killed by Lamech.<sup>8</sup> Several further interpretations are surveyed: as far as Cain’s sevenfold punishment is concerned, the commentators argued that it had to do with Cain’s seven sins, or the seven torments with which he was supposedly punished by God, or the seven generations between Adam and Cain’s killer Lamech. By similar interpretive manoeuvres, the seventy-sevenfold punishment on Lamech is said to refer to the seventy-seven souls of Lamech’s kin perished in the Flood, or the seventy-seven generations from Adam to Christ, who takes on himself the sins of all humanity (represented in the person of Lamech). These, however, are only some of the paths winding through what Jerome describes as ‘a vast forest of disputations’ on the questions of Cain, Lamech, and their sevenfold and seventy-sevenfold vengeance or punishments. Origen, we learn in an off-hand comment, had devoted two entire books of his lost commentary on Genesis to ‘this question’, which long continued to exercise the imagination of Christian commentators.

It is with such interpretive underpinnings that the story of the blind archer Lamech and his shooting of Cain was later widely disseminated throughout medieval and post-medieval Europe, not only through various kinds of texts, but also through the visual arts and biblical drama.<sup>9</sup> In English vernacular literature it is found already in the Old English *Genesis*. It often

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<sup>8</sup> The Latin text with a facing French translation is available in Jerome (Saint Jérôme), *Lettres*, ed. and trans. Jérôme Labourt, 8 vols (Paris, 1951), II, 51–65.

<sup>9</sup> A major medieval source, giving a full account of the shooting, was Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica*; on its influence see James H. Morley, ‘Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible’, *Speculum*, lxxviii (1993), 6–53. On the Lamech tradition see esp. Edmund Reiss, ‘The Story of Lamech and Its Place in Medieval Drama’, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ii (1972), 35–48; Brian Murdoch, ‘Lamech and

appears in later medieval works, where the form ‘Lameth’ is frequently employed. ‘Lameth’ is also found in the first printed account of the legend in England, William Caxton’s 1483 redaction of the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, which may serve as an illustration of both the story itself as it was known to an Englishman of the late fifteenth century, as well as of the accumulated, and only partly digested, stock of interpretations.<sup>10</sup> The only surviving English dramatic example is in the Noah episode of the *N-Town Play*, but the story appears in other plays from Britain (a fairly extensive Lameth episode is found in the Cornish *Creation of the World*), France, Germany, and Spain. The longest and most elaborate dramatic treatment of the Lamech story appeared as late as 1550, in the pageant-play *Adam und Heva* by the Swiss Jacob Ruf, and later still, in the early seventeenth century, the subject was handled by the Spanish playwrights Vélez de Guevara and Lope de Vega.<sup>11</sup> The *N-Town* account is notable for its emphasis on Lameth’s ‘raving’ rage at his loss of sight:

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the Other Lamech’, in *The Medieval Popular Bible: Expansions of Genesis in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2003), 70–95; Heather O’Donoghue, ‘What Has Baldr to Do with Lamech? The Lethal Shot of a Blind Man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish Exegetical Traditions’, *MAE*, lxxii (2003), 82–107.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacobus de Voragine, [*The Golden Legend*], ed. and trans. William Caxton (Westminster, 1483), fos. 38v–39r.

<sup>11</sup> See Murdoch, ‘Lamech’. Murdoch’s claim that the medieval drama ‘only rarely allows Lamech onto the stage’ (84) seems to be at least somewhat contradicted by the number, dispersion, date and nature of the works he himself references and discusses. It is, of course, on the surviving evidence of medieval drama that the judgment is based and this evidence can be plausibly interpreted to support different conclusions; for example, the extensive dispersion of the motif and the very late date of the works of Ruf and the Spanish playwrights can be taken precisely as evidence of Lamech’s rootedness in theatrical tradition.

Gret mornyng I make and gret cause I haue!

Alas, now I se not: for age I am blynde.

Blyndenes doth make me of wytt for to rave;

Whantynge of eyesyght in peyn doth me bynde!<sup>12</sup>

I used to be the best of archers, rages blind Lameth, and implores his boy to find him a mark to shoot at; the boy thinks he sees a beast in the bush, causing Lameth to kill Cain; enraged, Lameth kills the boy, calling him a ‘stynkyng lurdeyn’, and ends his part with a wail of despair. The widening cycle of wrath and vengeance is finally broken by the Flood: as Lameth departs from the stage, Noah returns to mourn its coming, even though it is just punishment ‘for synne of mannys wylde mood’.

Essentially, the Christian tradition came to see Lamech as a figure of rage and vengeance, who repeats, with greatly magnified consequences, the sin of his accursed forefather. In spite of his marginal role in the biblical text, Lamech thus assumes a place of considerable importance in Christian history, becoming indeed ‘a crucial pivot in the whole salvific scheme’.<sup>13</sup> The legend’s presence in literature, drama, and the visual arts bears abundant testimony to its importance and artistic potential—is it present in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*? As already noted, the most important and indeed most obvious parallel between the blind archer and Shakespeare’s prince of Denmark is that between Lamech’s killing of his fratricidal kinsman Cain and Hamlet’s killing of his fratricidal uncle Claudius, whom the play on two occasions explicitly relates to Cain (Claudius’s mention of ‘the first corpse’, I.ii.105, and his admission that his crime ‘hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder’, III.iii.36–8). The story of Cain also pervades the gravediggers scene: one of the clowns boasts

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<sup>12</sup> *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*, ed. Stephen Spector, 2 vols (Oxford, 1991), I, 45.

<sup>13</sup> O’Donoghue, ‘What Has Baldr to Do with Lamech’, 97.

of being an heir to 'Adam's profession' (V.i.31), while Hamlet remarks that this same 'knave' treats a human skull 'as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder' (V.i.76–7). To these are perhaps to be added Hamlet's lines at I.ii.256–7: having been informed of the apparition in the likeness of his father, the prince jumps to the conclusion that it is his 'father's spirit, in arms' and voices his conviction that 'Foul deeds will rise, / Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes'. This seems distinctly evocative of God's admonishment of Cain at Genesis 4:10, especially in the Geneva translation, the only contemporary version which gives 'earth' rather than 'ground' in this passage: 'What hast thou done? the voyce of thy brothers blood cryeth vnto me from the earth'.

Furthermore, the story of Cain and Lamech was directly related to the problem of vengeance, which, of course, is also the problem of *Hamlet*. God's injunction against the killing of Cain was seen as the archetype of God's injunction against taking justice into one's own hands. Violating this divine injunction, Lamech does the same thing as Hamlet: he takes justice into his own hands rather than leaving it to God. James Yonge's 1422 *Gouernaunce of Prynces* mentions the blind archer precisely as an example of unfruitful and un-Christian punishment.<sup>14</sup> This and other such references make it clear that one misses the point by objecting that Lamech was blind and thus irresponsible for his shooting of Cain. In the Christian reading, Lamech's physical blindness could be understood as a spiritual one—the blindness of pride, anger, and revenge—or submitted to wider-ranging typological, allegorical, etymological, and numerological interpretations, or dealt with in straightforward

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<sup>14</sup> See James Yonge, *The Gouernaunce of Prynces, or Pryvete of Pryveteis*, in *Three Prose Versions of the Secreta Secretorum*, ed. Robert Steele (London, 1898), 167: 'For correccion *with-out* mercy is a blyne wodnys, And lyke a blynd archere, whyche wenyth to smyte a dere, and hittyth a man, as lameth did, that Purposyd to shote a wilde beste *and* smote Cayme *and* hym killid'.



ethical and legal terms. A good example of the latter is Lamech's appearance in the treatment of accidental killing in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, where the story is attributed scriptural authority and is submitted as evidence in support of the argument that manslaughter, if due to negligence, is in fact not manslaughter but murder.<sup>15</sup> This remained the view of Protestant theologians: Calvin, for example, insists that '[h]e hath not therefore escaped the crime of manslaughter, that hath kept himselfe from shedding of blood. If thou commit anie thing indeede, if thou goe about any thing with endeuour, if thou conceiue any thing in desire and purpose that is against the safetie of an other, thou art holden guiltie of manslaughter'.<sup>16</sup>

The question of murder and homicidal intent is of obvious importance to Hamlet, especially with respect to the killing of Polonius and Hamlet's subsequent disavowal of 'purposed evil' in the deed. Indeed, Hamlet's disavowal can only be taken ironically, as his case is much simpler than those discussed by the above-cited theologians: there is simply no doubt that in thrusting his sword at the 'rat' behind the arras Hamlet was aiming to kill—'Dead for a ducat, dead!' (III.iv.24). The identity of the 'rat' is irrelevant to the question of intent; Hamlet certainly did not intend to kill Polonius, but just as certainly he intended to kill *someone*. The real issue here, then, is not whether Hamlet is guilty of 'purposed evil', for he most definitely is, but whether or not the prince is aware of the irony in what he is saying—whether it is Laertes or himself, or both, that he is deluding. It is tempting to see Hamlet's

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<sup>15</sup> See *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas Literally Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province*, 22 vols (London, 1929), X, 211–12.

<sup>16</sup> *The Institution of Christian Religion, written in Latine by M. John Caluine*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1587), fo. 126<sup>v</sup>.

arrow metaphor as another connection between him and Lamech,<sup>17</sup> while it also seems significant that the prince kills Polonius by stabbing a ‘rat’ behind an arras—Lamech, it will be remembered, kills Cain believing he is killing an animal hiding behind a bush.

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<sup>17</sup> No commentary on Hamlet’s metaphor is found in the current critical editions of the play: see *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2006); *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, updated edn (Cambridge, 2003); *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (1987; repr. Oxford, 1994). Jenkins claimed that ‘[t]he figure of the arrow that, once released, may go farther than one meant is common’, citing a passage from Thomas Nashe’s *Anatomie of Absurditie*: see *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (1982; repr. Walton-on-Thames, 1997); a similarly elaborate archery-based metaphor is found in the play itself (Claudius at IV.vii.21–4). The Folio reads ‘mother’ instead of ‘brother’ here, but ‘brother’ is now generally accepted in single-text editions, even those (like Hibbard’s) which are based on the Folio. The common understanding, and one in keeping with the flow of the whole passage, is that ‘brother’ refers to Laertes, varying Hamlet’s two prior appeals to him by name and anticipating ‘this brother’s wager’ at V.ii.199; cf. Jenkins, according to whom Hamlet’s word-choice acknowledges ‘the bond between the two revengers’, Laertes being ‘both his foe and his second self’. Hamlet, then, has hurt his ‘brother’ Laertes by unintentionally killing his father and the metaphor of the misdirected arrow seems to be another echo of the Lamech legend. What is puzzling here, however, is ‘o’er the house’ No account of Lamech which I have come across includes such a detail and in fact the reference really seems to be not to the Lamech story—or not *only* to the Lamech story—but rather to the episode of David and Jonathan recounted at 1 Sam. 20. King Saul, Jonathan’s father, means to kill David, so Jonathan and David devise an elaborate plan whereby Jonathan will test his father’s opinion, while David will hide in the fields for three days, after which they will both come to the ‘stone Ezel’ (a stone waymark, the Geneva note explains). ‘And I will shoote three arrowes’, says Jonathan, ‘on the side thereof, as though I

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shot at a marke. / And after I will sende a boy, *saying*, Goe, seeke the arrowes. If I say vnto the boy, See, the arrows are on this side thee, bring them, & come thou: for it is well with thee and no hurt [cf. Hamlet's 'hurt my brother'], *as* the Lord liueth. / But if I say thus vnto the boy, Beholde, the arrowes are beyonde thee [cf. 'o'er the house'], goe thy way' (20:20–2).

Jonathan confirms that Saul means to kill David and when the two meet at the appointed place he shoots his arrow, 'And when the boy was come to the place where the arrowe was that Jonathan had shotte, Jonathan cryed after the boy, and sayde, Is not the arrowe beyond thee?' (20:37), meaning that David is to flee. 'Brother' fits this perfectly, as the brotherly love between the two men is repeatedly stressed and at 2 Sam. 1:26 David explicitly mourns his 'brother Jonathan'. Clearly, Hamlet's invocation of David and Jonathan is meant as an ironic contrast to the completely debased relationship between him and Laertes; Hamlet has killed Laertes' father yet renounces his responsibility for the deed, while Laertes pretends to accept Hamlet's dubious apology even as he is about to kill him. Other analogies between Hamlet and David are analysed by Gene Edward Veith Jr., "'Wait upon the Lord": David, *Hamlet*, and the Problem of Revenge', in *The David Myth in Western Literature*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik (West Lafayette, 1980), 70–83. Still, why 'o'er the *house*'?

Jonathan's sign for the 'hurt' his father means to David is to shoot the arrow 'beyond' the 'stone Ezel'—no house is mentioned. It almost seems as if the two stories, or possibly more, have somehow fused here, perhaps partly due to the similarity in both Jonathan and Lamech being archers and employing boy aides. Yet whatever one makes of all this, it is to be emphasized that the arrow metaphor is inessential to the argument for the Hamlet–Lamech analogy, the weight of which hangs rather on the parallel between the two figures as slayers of their fratricidal kinsmen, the anagrammatic correspondence between their names, and the question of revenge in which both are implicated.

The view of Lamech as the culmination of antediluvian corruption persisted even when the ancient tradition lost the favour of Protestant commentators. In his commentary on Genesis Calvin rejected, although not before giving a brief account of it, Lamech's shooting of Cain as a 'vaine fable', urging a philological explication of the crux.<sup>18</sup> This explication appears to have been the basis for the rendering of Lamech's words in the Geneva version, where he is only a prospective rather than an accomplished killer. At least three observations are to be made here, however: first, it is testimony to the abiding strength of the apocryphal Lamech tradition that the Protestant commentators felt compelled to denounce it; second, this denunciation did not wholly stop further spread of the tradition in England, even into the seventeenth century, albeit with the requisite disclaimers;<sup>19</sup> third, the rejection of the traditional account of Lamech by no means entailed the rejection of the tradition's general

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<sup>18</sup> See *A Commentarie of John Caluine, vpon the first booke of Moses called Genesis*, trans. Thomas Tymme (London, 1578), 153–4: 'in my opinion their iudgment is true, which turne the Verbe of the preterperfect tense into the time to come or future tense, and vnderstande it indefinitely: as if he did boaste, that he was strong and violent enough, to kill the moste strong enimie. Therefore I reade the text after this manner, I will kill a man, &c.'

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Samuel Purchas, citing Peter Martyr, citing Rashi: 'As for the Iewish dreames, that *Lamech* was blinde, and by the direction of *Tubalcaine* his sonne guiding his hand slew *Caine*, supposing it had been a wilde beast, which when he knew, so intraged him, that he killed his son also, they that list may follow'; Samuel Purchas, *Pvrchas his Pilgrimage*, 2nd edn (London, 1614), 35–6; see Peter Martyr Vermigli, *In primum librum Mosis, qui vulgo Genesis dicitur, comentarii* (Tiguri, 1579), 24. It is also interesting to note that in contrast to the Protestant versions the Douay-Rheims Bible included an extensive note on Gen. 4:23 referring the reader to the Lamech legend as '[a] probable sense according to the Hebrewes Tradition'; see *The Holie Bible Faithfvlly Translated* (Douay, 1609).

import. Cain and Lamech continued to be seen as the first and final links in the growing chain of corruption leading to the Flood, and their sins specifically included that of premeditated vengeance.<sup>20</sup> Especially interesting is Calvin's reading of Genesis 4:10, mentioned above as possibly—and if so, ironically—echoed in *Hamlet*, I.ii.256–7. 'God sheweth' by this, explains Calvin, 'that he knoweth and vnderstandeth the faultes of men, though none complaine or accuse'—as Hamlet does—and that 'GOD will be more readie to reuenge our cause, the more modestly that we submit our selues to suffer all thinges'—as Hamlet does not.<sup>21</sup> The silent suffering of the wronged soul is louder in God's ears than 'any eloquence of Rhetoricians'; Hamlet, by contrast, is Shakespeare's longest, extravagantly rhetorical part. Calvin's commentary devotes more attention to Cain than to Lamech, but the two figures are related in such a way that to address Cain means at the same time to address his descendant, whose sins duplicate and surpass his own: the example of Lamech 'teacheth, that men doe alwayes growe from euill to worse.□...□Thus the brutish outrage of cruell men doeth increase□...□and they are so little touched with repentance, that they are always readie prest to burie one murder with tenne more'.<sup>22</sup>

So it is with vengeance: the worst thing about it is that it only leads to more vengeance. Not only does Hamlet's vengeance on Claudius claim several collateral victims—it also leads to Laertes' vengeance on Hamlet. Ultimately, the toll of vengeance turns from sevenfold to seventy-sevenfold, or, in the frenzied words of Laertes about to leap, with sinister symbolism, into his sister's grave:

O, treble woe

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentarie*, 125–55.

<sup>21</sup> Geneva's note to Genesis 4:10 summarizes this same interpretation: 'God reuengeth the wrongs of his Saints, though none complaine: for the iniquitie it selfe cryeth for vengeance'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head  
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense  
Deprived thee of! (V.i.242–5)

Cain's crime leads to Lamech's, Lamech's to the Flood. Claudius's leads to Hamlet's, Hamlet's to the bloodbath in the hall of Elsinore.

Finally, there is the anagrammatic correspondence between the names 'Hamlet' and 'Lameth'.<sup>23</sup> As already noted, the form 'Lameth' for the name of either or both of the biblical Lamechs appears in various English texts dating from the medieval period until the end of the sixteenth century, both Latin and vernacular. It may have originally arisen for the purpose of distinguishing between the two figures.<sup>24</sup> It seems to have been common in Middle English

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly motivated, punning names appear elsewhere in Shakespeare: in terms of anagrammatic derivation perhaps the most obvious parallel is 'Caliban', but there are a few other examples to be found in *Hamlet* itself—even if it is coincidental that Hamlet is urged to reason by a character named 'Horatio', there is no coincidence about the fact that the idea of a duel with Laertes, which proves fatal not only for the duelists but for Claudius and Gertrude as well, is put into the prince's head by a horseman named 'Lamord' (IV.vii.60–88; see the note on Lamord in Jenkins's edition, p. 369). For other interesting instances see e.g. Murray J. Levith, *What's in Shakespeare's Names* (Hamden, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> For examples of alternative forms used for this purpose ('Lamek' and 'Lamed', 'Lamech' and 'Lemech') see Murdoch, 'Lamech', 70–1. The *Cursor Mundi* employs 'Lameth' for both figures, distinguishing between 'Lameth' (the Sethite) and 'Lameth the Blind'; see *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Richard Morris, 7 vols (London, 1874–93), I, 93–5. As an example of 'Lameth' applying to both figures Murdoch cites the fifteenth-century *Abbreuiacion of Chronicles* of John Capgrave: 'þere were too men of þis same name Lameth'; 'Lamech', 76. For another fifteenth-century example see 'The Historye of the

and is employed in diverse works ranging from translations and paraphrases of the Bible to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>25</sup> Although these works are all originally in manuscript, some of them, along with 'Lameth', survived into print. *The Canterbury Tales* are a notable case in point: 'Lameth' is retained in Caxton's editions and is still there, more than a century later, in

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Patriarchs', ed. S. R. Daly (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1951), 20–5. For an example of the form applying to the Sethite Lamech, with the Cainite left out altogether, see *A Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, ed. Herbert Kalén and Urban Ohlander, 5 vols (Göteborg, 1923, vol. 1; Stockholm, 1955–72, vols 2–5), I, 10. There are also cases where the form varies between 'Lamech' and 'Lameth' for the same figure within the same work, as, for example, in some of the early English Bibles.

<sup>25</sup> For further Middle English examples see *The Holy Bible ... Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and His Followers*, ed. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, 4 vols (Oxford, 1850), I, 86–8, II, 316, IV, 154; *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, ed. Churchill Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, 9 vols (1865–86; repr. Wiesbaden, 1964), II, 231 n. (the reading 'Lamech' elsewhere in this edition appears to be an editorial standardization, see vol. I, p. lxx, n. 1); Reginald Pecock, *Reginald Pecock's Book of Faith: A Fifteenth-Century Theological Tractate*, ed. J. L. Morison (Glasgow, 1909), 265; the various manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, where Lameth is mentioned in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *The Squire's Tale*. For instances in Latin texts from Britain see *The Chronicle of Adam Usk, 1377–1421*, ed. C. Given-Wilson (Oxford, 1997), 42; *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots, and Other Early Memorials of Scottish History*, ed. William F. Skene (Edinburgh, 1867), 134. For examples of usage in French and Dutch see Murdoch, 'Lamech', 72; Jacob van Maerlant, *Rymbybel*, ed. J. David, 3 vols (Brussels, 1858–9), I, 47.

Speght's *Workes* of 1598.<sup>26</sup> It also appears in at least some originally sixteenth-century English works: for example, it is found in Tyndale's New Testament (Luke 3:36), and in both the Old (1 Chronicles 1:3) and the New Testament (Luke 3:36) of the Great Bible, the first publicly read English Bible, which went through a number of editions between 1539 and 1569. In subsequent translations the form was uniformly replaced by 'Lamech', which must have contributed to its standardization elsewhere. The above examples make it clear, however, that 'Lameth' did not completely vanish and that a reader of the late sixteenth century could encounter it in a significant number of texts.

The appearance of both the story and the form 'Lameth' in the *N-Town Play* is perhaps even more important, for it opens an alternative route by which both the tradition and the name may have reached Shakespeare. Over the past century or so, scholarship has been steadily revealing the extent of Shakespeare's debts to 'medieval' drama, including the mystery cycles, whose existence in England has now been documented to actually postdate *Hamlet*. Scholars have also given a fresh hearing to the old hypothesis about Shakespeare's first-hand experience of the cycles, which is certainly the simplest, if not the only, way of accounting for the echoes of the mysteries in his plays. For example, Michael O'Connell has argued not only that 'Shakespeare certainly knew and experienced the Coventry Corpus Christi theater, probably several times, in his boyhood and adolescence', but that there are

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<sup>26</sup> See [*The Canterbury Tales*] (Westminster, 1477), fos. 107r, 131r; [*The Canterbury Tales*] (Westminster, 1483), sig. O7v, Q7v; *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chavcer, newly Printed*, [ed. Thomas Speght] (London, 1598), fo. 33r.

'Lameth' is also retained in the printed editions of the Englished *Polychronicon* and the *Chronicles of England*: see *Polycronycon* (Southwark, 1527), fos. 61v–62r; *The Cronycles of Englonde with the dedes of popes and emperours, and also the descripcyon of Englonde* (London, 1528), fos. 2v–3r.



echoes in Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, of a Cain and Abel episode (which was commonly followed by one on Noah and the Flood, into which a dramatization of Lamech's killing of Cain was sometimes inserted).<sup>27</sup>

Although inessential to the argument, it is certainly intriguing to consider the possibility of Shakespeare's first-hand experience of a Lamech episode in a late sixteenth-century scriptural play, where the form 'Lameth', as the two surviving British examples show, would have likely been used. Yet wherever his knowledge of the story came from, it is clear that besides the raving Amleth of Saxo and Belleforest, the raving Hamlet of Shakespeare has another forefather in the raving Lameth of medieval and post-medieval tradition. The relation between the characters and their stories is clear, the parallels simply too numerous and specific to be discounted as accidental. The anagrammatic correspondence between the names

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<sup>27</sup> See Michael O'Connell, 'King Lear and the Summons of Death', in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, ed. Curtis Perry and John Watkins (Oxford, 2009), 201. There remain, of course, many open questions with regard to the hypothesis of Shakespeare's first-hand experience of the mystery plays, especially with regard to the Coventry cycle and the long-debated issue of whether or not this particular cycle contained Old Testament material. The latest editors of the Coventry fragments still take no definitive stand on this issue: see *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, 2000), 9. It also seems that scholarship has somewhat neglected the example of the *N-Town Play*, which shows that English scriptural drama could be accommodated to the format of the 'theatre-in-the-round' and that in this format it could go on tour and thus need not always be associated with a particular time or place. In hypothesizing about Shakespeare's exposure to the mysteries, should one not, without compelling evidence to the contrary, also consider the possibility of such touring mystery cycles, or touring scriptural drama of some sort or another?

may have been suggested by the previous shift from Amleth to Hamlet. The connection, relating Hamlet to a (pseudo-)biblical figure associated with murder, rage, and vengeance and thus highlighting the religious context and ethics of Shakespeare's play, has considerable interpretive ramifications which future readings and editions of the play should take into account.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I wish to thank Irena Bratičević and Ivan Lupić for their assistance and advice.